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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT MA, OPPOSITION PARTY SEEK POLITICAL
REDEMPTION IN LOCAL ELECTIONS

11. (C) Summary: Both President Ma Ying-jeou and the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) view the December 5 elections for county magistrates, city mayors and local council members as crucial to resurrecting their battered political fortunes. Ma has been racing around the island to campaign for candidates from his ruling Kuomintang (KMT) party, and a strong showing could boost his anemic public approval ratings. The election also is the first test of Ma's effort to promote novice candidates untainted by the corruption that is endemic among the party's entrenched factions. Meanwhile, the DPP is hoping for a comeback after embarrassing losses in legislative and presidential elections. Both parties want to build momentum for more important elections in Taiwan's major urban centers next year. End Summary.

The General Lowdown on Local Elections

12. (C) From September to November, Poloffs made reporting trips to many of the 17 counties and cities that will choose magistrates and mayors on December 5. The KMT is defending 13 local offices up for grabs and the DPP three; another is held by a KMT-aligned minor party. Some jurisdictions have unique political landscapes that help determine how the local electorate votes. For example, local factions dominate the scene in rural Yunlin County, while ethnicity drives how one votes in Hualien County. Hakka, Mainlander and Aborigine voters tend to be pro-Blue (KMT), while their Minnan (Taiwanese whose ancestral home is Fujian Province) counterparts unswervingly support the DPP. Political observers told us that Taiwan voters were generally consistent in their party preferences over the years, casting their ballots for either the KMT or DPP candidate. We also discovered, however, that many voters remained undecided and this created a good deal of uncertainty in Yilan County, one of the key races (see septel).

13. (C) Our contacts noted that voters typically were more concerned with local issues and candidates' track records in serving the community than with island-wide issues. Candidates who were longtime residents in the constituencies in which they were running typically fared better than outsiders; our contacts insisted that familiarity bred political support. As a result, while candidates employ legions of election trucks emblazoned with their photos to rumble through neighborhoods and blast campaign slogans, they also spend considerable time visiting produce markets, tromping door-to-door and trekking to isolated villages to grab every voter hand in sight.

14. (C) Another important factor in local elections is vote buying, which is particularly prevalent in rural areas such as Yunlin County. The KMT Chiayi County Chairman acknowledged to Poloffs that candidates had to buy votes to get supporters to the polls. (Note: The going price for a vote was said to range from roughly \$17 to \$64 and may be for a single candidate or a slate of candidates. Handlers usually distributed the money, but they had difficulty in confirming whether recipients actually voted as promised. End

note.) Central and local law-enforcement officials have promised to crack down on the practice, and both major parties have exchanged accusations of dirty politics. As in past elections, it is difficult to gauge the scope of the practice or its affect on the outcome of this election.

A Test for Ma and His "Clean" Strategy

15. (C) As part of his effort to combat rampant vote-buying, President Ma has been pushing to clean up the notoriously corrupt KMT and has redoubled his efforts since returning to the party chairmanship in October. (Note: Three KMT legislators lost their seats this year due to vote-buying charges. End note.) For example, the KMT excluded members with criminal records from participating in primaries for the elections, including one lawmaker who went on to run as an independent candidate in Hualien. In a few constituencies -- but by no means all -- the party favored electoral novices; in others, such as Hsinchu County, veteran politicians with a flair for background dealings still got the nod. Among the new KMT faces were a college professor in Yunlin County, a former director of the county agriculture bureau in Hualien County, and a former director of the city labor bureau in Hsinchu City. In a meeting with Poloffs, the unassuming KMT Hualien candidate, Tu Li-hua, largely kept silent as she deferred to her husband who was helping her run her campaign.

16. (C) Promoting untainted but untested politicians represents some risk to Ma as all face tough or nearly hopeless battles. Moreover, in seven races, long-time KMT politicians resigned from the party to run as independents because they were shut out in or disgruntled with the

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nomination process. According to our contacts, the "rebel" candidates had good chances of winning in Hualien and Hsinchu counties, where they both had the support of the outgoing KMT magistrates. The KMT Hualien County Chairman lamented to Poloffs that in the past the party nominee would always win the magistracy. Ma's efforts to clean up the KMT could suffer a sharp setback should the novice candidates fare poorly and tainted rebel candidates, such as the one in Hualien, do well.

17. (C) That helps explain why Ma has maintained an exhaustive campaign schedule in the run-up to the election, racing to multiple constituencies each day, particularly those in which novices are running or in which party candidates are facing strong challenges from KMT rebels or the DPP. Initially there was speculation about just how active Ma would be as a campaigner given public misgivings about his handling of typhoon relief in August, his negotiation of a controversial beef protocol with the United States, and his rapid rapprochement with China. Yet he has appeared in rally after rally with enthusiastic KMT candidates, often appearing under huge billboard-sized photographs of him and the local party standard-bearer in smiling victory poses. As a result, even if the races ultimately turn on local issues, many will see the elections as a mid-term assessment of Ma's performance as President.

DPP Hopes to Gain At Least One Seat

18. (C) That suits the DPP just fine as it seeks to retain the three seats it has -- the magistracies of Pingtung, Yunlin and Chiayi counties -- and pick up at least one other, most likely the traditional party stronghold of Yilan County. As DPP Party Chairwoman Tsai Ing-wen endures a campaign schedule as frenetic as Ma's, she is urging voters to cast their votes to register displeasure with the President. While criticism of Ma administration policies may resonate with some voters, our contacts believed most would base their decision on the individual candidates and local issues. In Yilan, for example, the incumbent KMT magistrate is having a tough time

because of his own mediocre track record and public anger over his cancellation of several popular local events established by his DPP predecessors.

¶9. (C) With Yilan up for grabs and the KMT in jeopardy of losing two magistracies to rebel candidates, both parties are pulling out all the stops. Bigwigs from both parties -- from Premier Wu Den-yih for the KMT to former Vice President Annette Lu and former premiers Su Tseng-chang and Frank Hsieh of the DPP have all hit the hustings. In one instance, a near riot almost broke out when Ma and Hsieh crossed paths in Hsinchu County. Ma and the others were expected to conduct non-stop campaigning through election eve.

Comment: Election Implications

¶10. (C) The outcome of the December 5 elections will have important implications for both parties and their chairs; not suprisingly the spin-meisters already are out in force. DPP International Affairs Deputy Director Hsieh Huai-hui and other contacts have told Poloffs that retaining three seats would be a satisfactory outcome for the opposition party but would indicate that Tsai needed to do more to prepare for next year's elections. (Note: In 2010, voters will select the heads of Taiwan's five special municipalities: Taipei, New Taipei, Tainan, Kaohsiung and Taichung. End note.) The opposition party would consider picking up a fourth seat a victory that would help restore confidence among supporters and build momentum for next year. However, should the DPP come away with less than three seats, our contacts believed Tsai would have to step down as chair in line with party tradition.

¶11. (C) Meanwhile, the elections have exposed internal discord within the KMT that would prove particularly problematic for Ma if the party does poorly. A weak KMT showing could signal difficulty for Ma in maintaining party discipline, particularly among lawmakers already irritated at the administration's lack of communication with them. A poor showing might also shatter the sense that Ma will inevitably be re-nominated as the KMT's presidential candidate in 2012 and as one of our contacts suggested would make China question Ma's strength and abilities. Our contact pointed out that China would be nervous if the DPP were to gain a seat and build momentum going into next year's more important elections.